

## **Becoming a family - 11/26/2003**

A couple adopted four siblings on Michigan Adoption Day.

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EXETER TOWNSHIP - Tom and Debbie Thomson admit that to other people, adopting four children ages 5 to 13 may seem crazy.

They're both retired, after all. Mr. Thomson is 60, Mrs. Thomson 53, and they shudder to think how old they'll be when the youngest, Joshua, is 21. Both have had children of their own, all grown now.

The idea may seem crazy. But take a look at these kids, the Thomsons say, and the reasons are obvious. When Joshua, 5, came to live with the Thomsons two years ago, he couldn't handle a lot of hugging or affection. He now runs to Mrs. Thomson after bumping his head, hoping for and getting a reassuring cuddle and kiss on his boo-boo.

John, 13, who used to get into fights at school constantly, has mellowed and was the first to answer an emphatic "yes" when the Thomsons asked the children if they wanted to be adopted.

Over time, the question of whether the Thomsons would adopt these four foster children evolved into this - how could they not adopt them?

"These are our kids," Mrs. Thomson says very simply.

Any perceived difficulty there may be in opening hearts and home to children is nothing compared to what these children have faced already, Mr. Thomson said. The Thomsons recognize the strength these children have, and are inspired by it.

"It's the structure, the security you can give these kids (that's so important)," Mr. Thomson said. "If I were a kid, I don't know if I could do it. I don't know if I could be dragged out of my home and put in a home I didn't know."

The four siblings include John, Joshua, Brittany, 9, and Kasey, 10. They came to live with the Thomsons two years ago and Tuesday became official members of the family as part of Michigan Adoption Day.

The family stood before Monroe County Family Court Judge Pamela Moskwa and professed their eagerness to put the letter of law to something they already feel with their hearts.

"You will be the parents of these children from this day forward," Judge Moskwa said during the hearing.

Judge Moskwa asked if a strong parental bond had been established, to which the Thomsons replied affirmatively. She informed them that adoption is a permanent agreement and that the siblings will now be their children just as if they were naturally born to them.

She asked the children how they like living with the Thomsons. No one responded, but the answer was apparent.

"I can tell by the smiles on your faces that it's working out pretty good," Judge Moskwa said.

John, Kasey, Brittany and Joshua came to live with the Thomsons nearly two years ago. Kasey came first, on her own, and the siblings had been split up in separate foster homes. The Thomsons didn't plan initially to take in all four children. That changed when the Thomsons saw them all together.

"There was a sibling visit and it got them together, gave them a chance to interact," Mrs. Thomson said. "It broke my heart."

"You get these kids who are separated, and they're holding each other, talking," Mr. Thomson said. "On the way home Debbie said, 'You know, those kids need to be together.' I said 'yeah, I know.' "

At first the Thomsons agreed to take only Brittany. Then an emergency occurred with Joshua and he needed a new placement. Within a month, all four children were living under their roof.

The first few weeks were what Mrs. Thomson called a "honeymoon period." The children, who had lived in as many as five different foster homes before coming to the Thomsons, were on their best behavior.

"They're going to be perfect," Mrs. Thomson said. "That's their intention. Then they get comfortable and they become themselves. Then you deal with broken kids. Their spirits, their trust in people has been destroyed. They don't know how to love."

Each child has presented his or her challenges, but the Thomsons firmly believe that their faith has led them to this point in their lives.

"God doesn't give you more than you can handle," Mr. Thomson said. "They're good kids. They just had a hard way to go. We reassure them that we're here to love them."

When the children's parents' rights were terminated this past spring, the adoption agency asked the Thomsons if they would be interested in adoption. The answer didn't come instantly.

"We struggled with it," Mrs. Thomson said. "We talked about our age, about how old Josh would be and could we give them what they need? We felt it was something God was telling us to do and we need not worry."

There were moments when the Thomsons doubted whether they were doing the right thing. But then they'd hear from a teacher or someone at church how much of a change they were seeing in the children and their spirits were lifted.

"Some day I'm going to see these kids and they'll be the adults I'll be proud of and it'll be worth every minute of pounding my head against the wall," Mrs. Thomson said.

The Thomsons talked with each child individually about adoption. If the children hadn't wanted it, they wouldn't have proceeded. Some were instant in their decision, for others it was an agonizing decision. But in the end they all chose to officially become "Thomsons."

"It's exciting," John said the day before the adoption hearing. "It's the beginning of a new life."

Now the family is planning family vacations. They can leave the state for the first time, something the children, as wards of the state, weren't allowed to do before the adoption. Maybe they'll head to Virginia Beach or Six Flags. But until then there's the trampoline in the backyard, the basketball hoop in the driveway and every night, dinner together as a family followed by Bible devotions and real conversation.

"We made a commitment to these kids," Mrs. Thomson said. "And you love them."

Fourteen children were adopted by nine families Tuesday in Monroe County as part of Michigan Adoption Day.

The adoptees ranged from an 11-month-old girl to a 16-year-old boy. There were international adoptions and sibling group adoptions. There was an adoptive mother who stood alone before the judge, her husband serving in Iraq. Some children were adopted by family members, others by foster parents.

Adoption hearings are generally closed to the public, but were opened as part of Adoption Day, presided over in Monroe County by Family Court Judge Pamela Moskwa.

This year, more than 100 children will be adopted through the Monroe County court system. Children become eligible when their parents' rights are terminated. Statewide, there are 4,600 children in the foster care system awaiting adoption. About 400 children do not have a family member identified to adopt them.

Most adoptions - 91 percent - are by relatives. Sibling groups are common, with 80 percent of adoptions involving more than one child.

For more information, visit the Michigan Adoption Resource Exchange at [www.mare.org](http://www.mare.org).

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